

Discovering Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson: A Biography

Thomas Jonathan Jackson was born on January 21, 1824, in Clarksburg, Virginia (now West Virginia). Thomas’ father died when Thomas was two years old, leaving Thomas’ mother widowed with little money and many debts. To support her three surviving children, Thomas’ mother became a teacher and also sewed. Mounting financial problems forced her to sell all her property, even the family home in Clarksburg. Four years later, Thomas’ mother re-married and moved the family to a neighboring county. When Thomas was seven she became very ill and sent the children to live with relatives. Later that year Thomas returned home to be at his mother’s side when she died. Thomas loved his mother deeply, and he remembered her with appreciation all his life.

After their mother’s death, Thomas and his sister Laura lived with their Uncle Cummins on Jackson’s Mill. The young Thomas quickly grew to like to his uncle and enjoyed working on the farm. But Thomas lived a lonely and independent life with his uncle, and received only three years of formal schooling. Worse, Thomas did not begin school until he was thirteen.

When he was eighteen, Thomas entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. Lacking the financial and educational advantages of his classmates, Jackson ranked at the bottom of his class his first year, though he improved with each year. When he was graduated in 1846, Thomas ranked seventeenth out of the fifty-nine graduates in his class. After graduation, Jackson and the other West Point cadets became officers of the United States Army, and Jackson joined an artillery unit sent to fight in the Mexican War, a territorial conflict between the United States and Mexico.

The Mexican War gave Jackson his first experiences in battle, and a fellow soldier said that Jackson was “as calm in the midst of a hurricane of bullets as though he were on dress parade at West Point.” Jackson was a part of an army bound for Mexico City, though the palace Chapultepec stood in between the American army and the Mexican capital. Chapultepec was a formidable castle atop a 200-foot hill that protected the entrances to city. The assault on Chapultepec began at dawn, but intense gunfire from the castle quickly pinned down American troops. At this point, Jackson’s unit advanced towards the trapped troops and immediately came under heavy fire. Though most of the unit retreated and its horses fell dead from Mexican fire, Jackson held his ground. Surrounded by a storm of artillery and musket fire, Jackson helped rally his unit and began firing on the fortress of Chapultepec. Reinforcements eventually arrived to continue the attack, which resulted in the capture of Mexico City. Stories of Jackson’s heroism spread throughout the army, and he received three promotions for his bravery during the fighting.

When the Mexican War was over, Jackson returned to the United States. From 1849-1851, he served at Army posts in New York and Florida. Tiring of peacetime Army life, Major Jackson accepted a teaching position at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington, Virginia, in 1851. While Jackson had proven himself on the battlefield in Mexico, the peaceful life in Lexington presented Jackson with very different challenges. Jackson was naturally uncomfortable in social gatherings and had difficulty making casual conversation. Because of these difficulties, Jackson often left people thinking he was reserved and awkward. Jackson, however, gradually adjusted to life in Lexington. In addition to teaching at VMI, Jackson became a business partner in a tannery, a director of the Lexington Savings Institution, and a member of the Franklin Society, Lexington's debate club. Jackson also became deeply religious while in Lexington. He joined the Lexington Presbyterian Church, founded a Sunday school for free and enslaved blacks, and was a founder and director of the Rockbridge Bible Society.

It was Jackson's faith that introduced him to his first wife, Elinor Junkin. They became close friends while teaching at the Presbyterian Sunday school in February 1852, and became engaged by Christmas of that year. Elinor was an educated and pious daughter of George Junkin, a Presbyterian minister and president of Washington College. Thomas and Elinor were married on August 4, 1853, in the Junkin home. The new couple went on a wedding tour of the North, visiting Philadelphia, Niagara Falls, Montreal, Quebec, and Boston, accompanied by Elinor's sister Margaret.

Deaths in Jackson's family soon marred his happy life in Lexington. Elinor died in childbirth just after their first anniversary. Two years later, the grieving Thomas took an extended tour of Europe. When he returned, he began courting Mary Anna Morrison. At the age of thirty-three, Thomas was eager to start a new family, and Thomas and Mary Anna married in 1857. Unfortunately, the Jacksons' first daughter died in infancy.

In 1859, Thomas and Mary Anna moved into the only house Thomas ever owned. Mary Anna wrote, "it was genuine happiness to him to have a home of his own...and it was truly his castle." They began decorating their home with furniture they bought on their honeymoon and other trips north. During the summer months, they worked in their flower and vegetable gardens. Thomas and Mary Anna traveled to various springs to take water cures, drinking mineral water and bathing in natural mineral springs, a popular way to treat illness in the mid-19th century. The Jacksons were to enjoy their peaceful lifestyle for only a few years. After Virginia seceded on April 21, 1861, Major Jackson left home to lead the VMI cadets to Richmond.

As an officer, Jackson led by his own example. One Confederate soldier wrote of Jackson: "From the calm, collected [person that he appears to be], he becomes the fiery leader. Passing like a thunderbolt along the front he is everywhere in the thickest of the fight, holding his lines steady, however galling the fire, and rallying his men to charge where the danger is greatest and the pressure heaviest..."

At the first battle of Manassas in July 1861, Jackson acquired the nickname “Stonewall.” The morning of the battle, Union troops were overwhelming the Confederates, who had begun to retreat. Another Confederate officer, General Bernard Bee, pointed to Jackson’s unit and shouted to his fleeing troops, “There stands Jackson like a stone wall, rally behind the Virginians!” Jackson’s brigade held its ground and turned the tide of the battle. After that day, Thomas was known as “Stonewall” Jackson, and his brigade as the “Stonewall Brigade.”

During the Valley Campaign of 1862, Jackson’s troops were outnumbered three to one. Against this disadvantage, Jackson fought six major battles and defeated the three armies that President Lincoln sent to secure the Shenandoah Valley. Jackson used complex maneuvers to isolate, confuse, and overwhelm the Union forces in the Valley. Relying on tactical deception, Jackson’s “foot cavalry” faked marches and attacked Union forces from unexpected directions. Jackson became known and feared for his highly effective use of misdirection and elaborate maneuver.

One of Jackson’s greatest battles was his last, the Battle of Chancellorsville near Fredericksburg, Virginia. In a meeting with the commanding general, Robert E. Lee, Jackson and Lee decided to split their army, and send Jackson’s larger portion around the Union Army. Jackson launched a surprise attack against General Joseph Hooker’s vulnerable right flank. The attack shattered two miles of the Union position.

After nightfall on May 2, 1863, Jackson and his staff rode along enemy lines to plan another attack. When Jackson and his staff returned to their own lines, Confederate soldiers opened fire, thinking the shadowy figures to be Union cavalry. Jackson was shot twice in the left arm, which was amputated in an attempt to save his life. Jackson rallied briefly, but caught pneumonia and died on May 10, 1863, at a hospital in Guiney Station, Virginia. His body was brought back to Lexington for burial.

Written by Stonewall Jackson House Staff, 1991.

Revised by Stonewall Jackson House Undergraduate Intern, 2005.

Discovering Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson: Question Sheet

Answer “true” or “false” for each of the following questions. When the answer is “false,” write the correct answer.

- 1) Thomas Jonathan Jackson was born on January 21, 1824, in Clarksburg, (West) Virginia. _____
- 2) After his mother’s death, Jackson lived at his Uncle Cummins’ home in Jackson’s Mill. _____
- 3) Though Jackson nearly failed to pass his first year at West Point, his standing had improved to sixteenth in his class. _____
- 4) Jackson won renown for his bravery in Mexico, particularly for his pivotal role in the assault on the fortress of Chapultepec. _____
- 5) After he left the Army, Jackson taught artillery tactics and mathematics at the Virginia Military Institute. _____
- 6) Jackson began teaching Sunday school classes soon after joining Lexington’s Grace Episcopalian Church. _____
- 7) Jackson married Elinor Morrison in 1853, but she died in childbirth two years later. _____
- 8) Jackson moved into his house on Washington Street with Mary Anna Junkin in 1858. _____
- 9) Virginia seceded from the Union on April 21, 1861. _____
- 10) Jackson won his nickname by defending a stone wall at the Battle of Bull Run/First Manassas. _____
- 11) Jackson successfully launched a surprise flank attack at the Battle of Chancellorsville. _____
- 12) Jackson died on May 2, 1863, after being wounded at Chancellorsville and having his right arm amputated. _____

Discovering Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson: Teacher Answer Key

Answer “true” or “false” for each of the following questions. When the answer is “false,” write the correct answer.

- 1) Thomas Jonathan Jackson was born on January 21, 1824, in Clarksburg, (West) Virginia. True
- 2) After his mother’s death, Jackson lived at his Uncle Cummins’ home in Jackson’s Mill. True
- 3) Though Jackson nearly failed to pass his first year at West Point, his standing had improved to sixteenth in his class. False - seventeenth
- 4) Jackson won renown for his bravery in Mexico, particularly for his pivotal role in the assault on the fortress of Chapultepec. True
- 5) After he left the Army, Jackson taught at the Virginia Military Institute. True
- 6) Jackson began teaching Sunday school classes soon after joining Lexington’s Grace Episcopalian Church. False-Lexington Presbyterian Church
- 7) Jackson married Elinor Morrison in 1853, but she died in childbirth two years later. False-Elinor Junkin
- 8) Jackson moved into his house on Washington Street with Mary Anna Junkin in 1858. False-Mary Anna Morrison
- 9) Virginia seceded from the Union on April 21, 1861. True
- 10) Jackson won his nickname by defending a stone wall at the Battle of Bull Run/First Manassas. False-Gen. Bee’s remark
- 11) Jackson successfully launched a surprise flank attack at the Battle of Chancellorsville. True
- 12) Jackson died on May 2, 1863, after being wounded at Chancellorsville and having his right arm amputated. False-left arm